

# Filomena Coppola

## Wallflower – the event

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Filomena Coppola's exhibition *Wallflower – the event* can be viewed at Australian Galleries – Smith Street, Collingwood (Melbourne) from 2–26 February 2012.

left  
Filomena Coppola,  
*Wallflower – Ready and Waiting*, 2011,  
pastel on paper, 80 x 80 cm

**SCRATCH SCRATCH, FLICK FLICK, RUB,** is the soundtrack in Coppola's studio as she works towards a new exhibition. One would be forgiven for thinking there was a flea-ridden animal occupying the space. This incidental auditory composition is produced by the scratching of pastel on paper, the flicking away of dust with a dry brush, and rubbing with a finger. The outcome of this process is a body of highly refined drawings that make up Coppola's solo exhibition at Australian Galleries in February 2012.

This new body of work has all the appearance of large botanical drawings of native Australian orchids, but somehow the plants have grown animal fur. On viewing the work, the trompe l'oeil effect induces a strong temptation to touch, yet there is also something stopping you, something awkward. By referencing two very familiar and usually comforting motifs in one image, Coppola injects a sense of discomfort that works alongside the sensuality evoked by tactile, organic matter such as fur, flesh and flowers.

The backgrounds of Coppola's creations are appropriated from the wallpaper designs of William Morris, referencing the colonial British culture that Coppola, of Italian heritage, is situated in. This decorative backdrop functions both conceptually and compositionally as a holding place for Coppola's creations. With strong influences from sometimes contrary forces these lifeforms haven't quite grown as nature intended, and are difficult to categorise.

Included in the exhibition are two large drawings that resemble the pelt of the *Thylacinus Cynocephalus* (meaning pouched dog with wolf's head). Like Coppola's imagery, the Tasmanian tiger is difficult to categorise. It was recorded as shy and secretive, with a nervous temperament, which is very much at odds with its common name, that of a fierce predator, and it was Tasmania's only mammal to become extinct since European settlement — an example of the knee jerk reaction humans have historically had to things they don't understand.

Today the Tasmanian tiger's striped fur conjures a sense of loss, sympathy, and hope that something so extraordinary has not been lost forever. Despite searches, and no hard evidence for its continued presence, numerous unofficial sightings demonstrate an unwillingness to accept the disappearance of an iconic creature. Thus the thylacine is a metaphor for displaced cultural heritage, and highlights an increasing awareness of what we have to lose. While the skins appear spread out flat like a rug, they taper to soft pink fleshy ripples which hint there is warmth and life, and that despite culture being disconnected from its origins, it is not completely lost.

The installation of the work extends from the wall in the form of an ephemeral drawing on the floor. This element of the exhibition stems from Coppola's 2011 site specific installation at *Palimpsest #8* in Mildura, titled *Wallflower Mirror rorriM*. More than a quarter of a cubic metre



Filomena Coppola, *Wallflower – Can't you see me?*, 2010, pastel on paper, 80 x 70 cm

of locally sourced red loam was spread over the floor of the gallery, upon which lines of yellow river sand were laid down. The dirt creates the effect of a Morris-like carpet which the viewer must walk over in order to examine the drawings on the wall, thus actively playing a part in rendering the design unreadable. This destruction or blurring of one part of the installation, in order to view another part, illustrates one of the means by which culture becomes homogenised — simply by being an observer of culture we leave our own imprint on it, besides carrying small parts of it away with us.

The title of the exhibition is most broadly referenced in four pairs of small drawings that adopt a playful quality, depicting furry plants sprouting from the wallpaper like giant tongues. Like the wallflower in a teen movie, sitting on the sidelines of the school dance, awkwardly observing, unsure whether to participate or not, Coppola's furry tongued flowers are approachable

and menacing at the same time. You don't know whether to stroke them or to be cautious, and, like the teenage wallflower, the fear does not come from the risk that it will bite, but that it will jump out from the wall and lick your face, **SLURP.**

Filomena Coppola, *Wallflower – Mirror rorriM* installation at *Palimpsest #8*, Mildura; red loam, yellow river sand (on floor) and pastel drawing

